*Note*

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator." In *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schoken, 1968, p. 80.

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**Tahavvol-e Nām-gozāri-ye Kudakān-e Tehrani, 1375-1394** [The Transformation of Baby Names in Tehran, 1996-2015], ʿAbbās ʿAbdi, Tehran: Pazhuheshgāh-e Farhang, Honar va Ertebātāt, 2017, ISBN 978-600-452-076-8 (pbk), 148 pp.

There has been a considerable volume of discussion about Iranian society's shifting relationship with Islam and the West, and the role of the Islamic Republic therein. Perhaps one of the most individual, private and intimate interactions that can contain clues about these changes is the decision of how to name a new-born child. Amir-Hossein, Ruhollah or Pārsā for him? Maʿsumeh, Delārām or Roksānā for her?

Despite government restrictions on the use of non-acknowledged western names, Iranians can access a plethora of baby names to pick from, including the Imams, the Quran, revolutionary figures, pop stars, ancient Shahnameh and pre-Islamic heroes, as well as Christian, Hebrew or Armenian names. How, at the macro-level, have naming patterns developed over time? Are Islamic names as popular as they were in the heyday of the 1979 Revolution?

In his latest book ʿAbbās ʿAbdi hopes to provide much-needed perspective on these pressing questions. ʿAbdi's main finding is a strong, secular decline in the share of Arabic and Islamic names in Tehran between 1996 and 2015, and, vice versa, a growth in the prevalence of western names for girls and non-Islamic Iranian names for both sexes.

Supported financially and logistically by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the research builds on and broadens an earlier study on trends in child naming in Tehran, co-authored with Samira Kalhor and published in a collected work several years ago[1]. This earlier essay investigates the period from 1966 to 1995—a period which is added and compared to ʿAbdi's new dataset ranging from 1996 to 2015. In other words, the title of ʿAbdi's new work is too modest: the book sheds light on social developments in Tehran spanning half a century, including seminal episodes such as the Shah's modernization plan, the 1979 Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War and the post-9/11 period. For both studies he uses a large sample of the data processed by the National Organization for Civil Registration, where all new-born babies are registered.

Several Iranian sociologists have looked at naming trends before.[2] ʿAbdi explains that most have done so with a much smaller sample, among ethnic minorities and per-

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ipheral regions, or by coding on the linguistic roots of names only. With a keen sociological eye, ʿAbdi is just as much interested in etymology—whether names are originally Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, Azeri or Hebrew—as in their socio-cultural classification. He emphasizes that these two classifications are mutually exclusive and should not overlap: it is impossible to compare changes in Persian and Islamic, or Iranian and Arabic names. The book reviews trends in each classification—linguistic and socio-cultural—separately.

ʿAbdi introduces a number of socio-cultural classifications that he believes are meaningful in decisions of baby naming. Macro-divisions include "Islamic," "national non-Islamic," "neutral" and "Western." But ʿAbdi splits Islamic names into five further sub-categories. These are "national Islamic" names, mainly the twelve Shiʿa Imams and other Shiʿa-related names; what he calls "new Islamic names," i.e. Quranic names such as Majid or Hamid that have only recently come in vogue; "revolutionary" terms, such as Sumayyah or Abāzar that saw an upsurge during the 1979 Revolution; "traditional Islamic" names, particularly those using prefixes such as Gholām-, ʿAbd- or Abu-; and "Quranic Hebrew" appellations, such as Ebrāhim or Sārā. Finally, non-Islamic names include "non-Islamic Hebrew" names like Iliyā or Mersānā, as well as Armenian, Christian or Assyrian names. Armenian and Christian names are largely classified as "Western" names. The "neutral" category includes names not attached to Islam, the Nation, or "the West"—think of Parvāneh (lit. butterfly).

Globally, baby names have become shorter, as concomitant processes of urbanization and individualization have popularized the philosophy that a first name should represent a baby's uniqueness and identity, rather than their ties to both sides of the family, or obedience to God and Church. Gradual condensing of first names has been noted for some of Iran's ethnic minorities, but ʿAbdi only discovers minor changes in name length in Tehran over the past half-century. What appears to have happened instead is that boys' first names prefixes that signify religious submissiveness, such as "Gholām" (lit. slave), have been substituted with prefixes that suggest power and strength, notably "Amir," meaning "commander" or "prince."

A handful of Islamic names top the list of most used names. Currently the most popular boys' name in Tehran is Amir-Hossein (5.2 percent of all names), and Fātemeh (8.2 percent) for girls. The longevity of Fātemeh as the number one name for girls is remarkable: it was the most popular name for the mothers of today's babies too.

But below these top scorers some notable changes have taken place. Only half of the boys are now given an Islamic name, down from 70 percent in 1996. For girls, this figure has fallen from 40 percent to just below 30 in the same period.

Both boys' and girls' names have diversified significantly, and parents increasingly opt for western or little-known non-Islamic Iranian names. The share of the top fifty first names in the total number of names has gone down for girls from 65 to 45 percent and for boys from 68 to 55 percent between 2002 and 2015.

ʿAbdi shows that Islamic names were already on the rise well before the 1979 Revolution, peaking in 1981–82 and declining thereafter. He argues that Islamization had already started in 1966, when the share of Persian and national names fell. Up to 85

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percent of all boys and 55 percent of all girls born between 1981 and 1985 had an Islamic name.

The timing of the decline seems to suggest that the Iran-Iraq War played a critical role in the resurgence of national names, while the collapse of the Soviet Union and emergence of so-called "post-Islamism" in Iran helped to stabilize the trend. The decline in Islamic names continued until 1991, when it picked up slightly, reaching 55 percent in 2001. Then suddenly, in the wake of 9/11 and largely overlapping with the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the share of Iranian and non-Islamic names surged upward from its long-term level of around 6 percent. By 2011 only 40 percent of all names were Islamic, while 14 percent were Iranian, the highest level ever recorded. Over the past five years, these proportions have stabilized again.

*Tahavvol-e Nām-gozāri-ye Kudakān-e Tehran* takes as its subject matter a novel and engaging topic, providing an abundance of data and figures while making a strong case for the complexity and transformation of the Tehrani psyche over time. At the same time, it is hard to detach an author from his work. This counts all the more for ʿAbbās ʿAbdi—a high-profile political activist and entirely self-taught sociologist. Having received his bachelor degree in polymer engineering before the revolution, he was one of the leaders of the "Muslim Students Following the Imam's Line"—the group that launched the US embassy hostage crisis in 1979.

As editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Salām* in the 1990s, ʿAbdi continued his activism, but this time contributing to the country's democratic shift. He also began advocating an improvement in relations with the West. Subsequently, his contentious politics landed him in prison several times. In the early 2000s ʿAbdi was arrested for piloting a survey, commissioned by Gallup, that found high popular approval for dialogue with the United States. His latest book should also be seen in this light: a call for the politicians' acknowledgment of Iranian society's shifting relationship with Islam and the West.

While its politics is one of the strengths of the book, ʿAbdi at times gets too drawn into all-too-typical Islam vs. West dichotomies, thus losing track of other potentially meaningful categories for interpreting first names. While the cultural underpinnings in choosing Islamic names, including those for "revolutionary," "new Islamic" and "traditional" names, are complex and historically informed, it would have been instructive to run the analysis on other registers outside of the Islam vs. West axis. For instance, what about the influence of famous film stars or music artists on selecting names? Or what about picking terms and names that were in vogue among the Left during and following the 1979 Revolution, such as Shurā (lit. "Council") or Amir-Parviz (in reference to a founder of the Marxist Fadāiyān-e Khalq). An inclusion of a master list in the book's appendices so that the reader could trace which name went into which of his classifications would also have been useful.

The book is a good and insightful read, and is highly recommend to sociologists, linguists and other scholars interested in processes of social change, Islamization and in the dynamics of Iran's internal politics of language.

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## *Notes*

1. ʿAbdi, *Chahār Pajhuhesh*.
2. E.g. Habibi, "Popularity of Islamic and Persian Names."

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2 Habibi, Nader. "Popularity of Islamic and Persian Names in Iran before and after the Islamic Revolution." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24, no. 2 (1992): 253–260.

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